

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

What's in a Name?¹

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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My daughter, an MD in her second year of residency at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) is in the process of adopting her new husband's name. Like many of her peers, she considered keeping her maiden name but decided to change from Dr. Smith to Dr. Bourne for personal and professional reasons. "We felt that if we have children it would be simpler and less confusing to have them with the surname that my husband and I share."²

From the professional perspective, she points to the plethora of MDs with the name *Dr. Smith*. "There are currently four doctors named Debra Smith in the UPMC system and every time I go into the OR I have to clarify who I am." Looking forward a few years when she hopes to have her own surgical practice, she feels it will be beneficial to not be just another Dr. Smith.



Patricia Thomson, DVM, Cornell University, 1960
(© Cornell University)



Don Herr, DVM, Cornell University, 1963
(© Cornell University)

Fifty years ago, during an era when it was common for women veterinarians and physicians to adopt their husbands' names when marrying, Dr. Patricia Thomson decided to keep her family name—she had been using it since she had received her DVM in 1960—instead of taking the name of her new husband, Don Herr, who would receive his DVM in 1963. They were planning to open a practice together in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and she was advised by her mentor, a seasoned veterinarian from New Jersey, to stick with the name Thomson, as she explained to me during an interview in 2010.³

I practiced under the name, Dr. Thomson. That was something that Dr. Engle⁴ told me, “You’re going to marry a man named Herr, and you’re going to be Dr. Herr, and he’s going to be Dr. Herr. You’re going to be hearing from clients, ‘Who do you want to see, Dr. Her Herr or Dr. Him Herr?’”

They built an apartment in their hospital and when their first child arrived, a carriage was often outside and in full view of the public and clientele. Dr. Thomson laughed as she finished the “naming” part of her story,

Not everyone knew we were a couple, and we heard there was talk going around, “Dr. Thomson and Dr. Herr had a baby!” At that time it was all pretty innovative, but it really was just done to be functional.



Harry J. Fallon, DVM, Cornell University, 1938
(© Cornell University)

Not all name change stories deal with gender. During the early decades of the 20th century, it was relatively common for Jewish students or veterinarians to change their names to make them sound less ethnic. During a trip through West Virginia in December 2007, I stopped to interview a Jewish man by the name of Harry J. Fallon who graduated in 1938. He had entered veterinary college in 1934 and changed his surname from Feldman to Fallon because he thought it would remove the perceived liability of having a Jewish-sounding name.

At that time, there was quite a bit of anti-Semitism, so I changed my name from Feldman to Fallon after my first year. I thought it would help me get a job later on. I was a little ashamed to be Jewish at the time because of all the anti-Semitism.⁵

I listened with emergent sadness, then a grin broke over his face as if to say, “Don’t feel badly; listen to what happened next.”

There was a veterinary practice in Akron, Ohio, called Barrett and Noonan. Barrett was of the Quaker faith, Noonan was Irish Catholic. One had graduated from Cornell and one from Ohio State; one was large animal oriented and one small animal. They were opposites in every respect but they got along beautifully.

They couldn’t decide whether to hire a Catholic or a Protestant [to work in their clinic] so they decided to hire a Jew. They got the top Jewish student each year from Cornell. The Morris boys⁶ were selected ahead of me but they wouldn’t split up and I was next in line. So the fact that I was hired was because I was a Jew.

Dr. Fallon stayed with Barrett and Noonan for two years, then moved to Huntington, West Virginia, where he practiced small animal medicine until the early 1990s. He was one of the earliest veterinarians to use general anesthesia in private practice.⁷

One of the most unfortunate naming stories of which I am aware is associated with a Cornell faculty member named Samuel Goldberg (1883-1964), a Russian immigrant who received his DVM from Cornell in 1914 and his PhD in pathology three years later. Goldberg was appointed assistant professor at Cornell and held that post, as well as working as a pathologist in Ithaca’s Memorial Hospital, until he moved to the Bronx in 1926.⁸

Dr. Tevis Goldhaft, who had married Dr. Goldberg’s daughter in 1935, told me that Dr. Goldberg was asked by the veterinary college administration at the time (circa 1926) to either change his name to a less Jewish-sounding name or remain as assistant professor without promotion to a higher academic rank for the rest of his career. Goldberg refused to change his name and left Cornell.⁹ He moved to New York City and secured a position as pathologist at the Bronx Hospital while he attended and graduated from New York University’s medical school. He ultimately became Director of the Department of Laboratory Medicine of The Presbyterian Hospital in Newark, New Jersey. He was founding member of the College of American Pathologists.

Goldberg’s son, like his father, graduated from Cornell in veterinary medicine (1941). Unlike his father and perhaps because of his father’s early professional experience, he was not so willing to carry the family name, choosing instead to become Dr. Edwin O. Gilbert.

¹ “What’s in a Name?”, from William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (II, ii, 1).

² Smith Debra A, MD (resident in plastic and reconstructive surgery at Univ Pittsburgh Medical Center), email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2013 June 3.

³ Thomson, Patricia Herr (retired veterinarian in Lancaster Pennsylvania), interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2010 June 12. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/17052>

⁴ Engle JB, DVM (private veterinary practitioner in Summit New Jersey, one of the very few small animal practice owners at the time and President of the American Animal Hospital Association, 1942-43).

⁵ Fallon Harry J, DVM (retired veterinarian, deceased 2011), conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) at Dr. Fallon's home in Huntington, West Virginia. 2007 Dec 18. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12271>

⁶ Alexander and Robert Morris were identical twins in Cornell's veterinary Class of 1938 and were recognized for their academic excellence.

⁷ Fallon, Harry J. *Ibid.*

⁸ Goldhaft Tevis (retired veterinarian, deceased 2009), interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2007 Sept 26. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/22013>

⁹ Goldberg's son, Edwin O. Gilbert, had a slightly different recollection of events in 1926, informing me that his father was not only denied promotion, but that he was told he wouldn't be appointed as department chair of Pathology—the position was open and he was the logical successor—unless he changed his name because donors would not look kindly on the institution. Gilbert EO (retired veterinarian, now deceased) telephone conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), 2008 Nov 30.

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Donald M. Herr DVM
Patricia Thomson DVM
Patricia Thomson Herr DVM
Harry Fallon DVM
Tevis Goldhaft DVM
Edwin O. Gilbert DVM
Samuel Goldberg DVM, PhD, MD
Debra A. Smith MD

TOPICS:

Women in Veterinary Medicine
Jewish Veterinarians

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he

spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.